

The Zen Master – based on John 3:1-17
Aspen Community UMC
February 17, 2008

Page 1 of 5

Consider the student going to the master
by dark of night, no less -
and walking into a conversation about the kingdom of God,
about what one must do to enter into this world of the spirit.
It's a conversation about what lies out there – or within us – that confuses us much of the time.

Notice the conversation.

This conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus has the character of one of those Zen koans -
those little stories, or dialogues, or questions
that come out of that Japanese Buddhist tradition known as Zen.

You've heard these Zen koans before.
Like this one: "Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand clapping?"
And when the student struggles in trying to interpret a koan,
the teacher might say, "Do not confuse the pointing finger with the moon."
The teacher is trying to tell the student that what he or she is really after is not interpretation,
but awakening.

Would you consider the koan as we explore this reading from John?
And let go of the ways you have thought about it in the past?

What happens in our reading?

A member of the Jewish ruling council, a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee,
a learned man, a rabbi,
comes to the young rabbi Jesus who is not part of anything -
any established religious or civic body -
comes to him in the dark of night.
Perhaps so he will not be seen by others -
or perhaps as a way for the writer to say that Nicodemus
was "in the dark" about these things he wanted to talk about -
like, "who was this Jesus?" and "what did he know"
about the kingdom, about the deeper things in life that we don't see.

So, Nicodemus comes to Jesus,
and a conversation happens.
First, Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus himself is a master -

The Zen Master – based on John 3:1-17
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February 17, 2008

Page 2 of 5

a healer, a man of God – because of the miracles he performed.
That was evidence for Nicodemus. But it also serves as an introduction.

Then Jesus expresses a truth – not in answer to Nicodemus question
but as the Zen master speaks to the student.
Because the master knows what the student needs to learn.

The master is inviting the student to enter a different state of mind -
or at least to move toward an enlightened state of mind -
an awakened mind – a mind more open to intuition – or to spirit -
a little more open to the unknown.

That is the purpose of the koan – to invite the student, the novice,
to leave rational thinking and let intuition lead.

The koan is to open one's mind.

In our everyday dealings with the world,
we get into patterns of thinking we call rational or logical.

But the world of spirit is different,
and the master, the spiritual master, is inviting the student
to leave the logical and enter into another way of learning.
Let's just call that new way of learning and seeing the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus listens.

“No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

In our everyday lives and through our formal education we take on
ideas about what is real. We formulate ideas about what is possible.

And, we accept these understandings.

For example, in the past scientists said that
time was linear and proceeded from one second to the next.
These truths are then supported and bolstered by educational systems,
and what seems like everyone.

What is theory becomes fact – so to speak.

We formulate theories about personality and ourselves in similar fashion.
Change then becomes an almost impossible task.

The Zen Master – based on John 3:1-17
Aspen Community UMC
February 17, 2008

Page 3 of 5

It is easy to see it in science, think of Galileo,
and the challenge he faced in trying to explain the solar system in a new way.

Or think of Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum physics
and how difficult it is to convince people, especially the learned in a field
to shift their perspective as new science surpasses old science.

Did you know that it was not until 1913 that the United States had an income tax?

Now when a Presidential candidate suggests that
we abolish the income tax and increase sales taxes to pay for our government
it seems hard even to imagine.

I am not advocating the idea or the candidate – that's not the point.
But I am saying such a thing is a little hard to get one's head around.

It takes a shift in thinking.

What we are talking about here between Nicodemus and Jesus
is more than a shift in thinking.

It takes a shift in listening, and a shift in hearing, a shift in presence.
It takes openness to the spirit that perhaps only a newborn is likely to have.

The purpose of the Zen koan is to upset or dislocate the mind
from its usual way of thinking.

Its purpose is to open our minds to other possibilities,
- other ways to experience, to consider what is real.
This is why I suggest we consider it here.

Jesus says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God
unless he is born of water and the Spirit.
Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
The master amplifies his original statement -
maybe to help the student along.

Nicodemus' mind was closed to an experience Jesus wants him to have.

By his question, "How can this be?"
He can't seem to get out of the rational.

The Zen Master – based on John 3:1-17
Aspen Community UMC
February 17, 2008

Page 4 of 5

Jesus amplifies again. "The wind blows wherever it pleases.
You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Another intuitive opportunity from the master to the student.

Jesus says, "You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?
And he continues to draw Nicodemus into this new way of considering the spirit world.

But Nicodemus is not so different from us.
And we, too, are confused before the master - when he tells us to be born again.
Or when he says, "For God so loved the world he gave his only son...
...that God gave a son, a child - became like a child and encountered the world
in a way that sacrifices part of the divine nature – to reveal something to you and me.

Sometimes we take it literally, or we struggle with the words to use to interpret it.
And, words are what we human beings are pretty good at.
We come up short, we and all the commentators and scholars.
But that just begs the point.

Nicodemus learned something that night.
We read later that he defended Jesus
and brought fine oils to anoint him after his crucifixion.
So, I expect Nicodemus began a new path that night
although we don't read about it in today's scripture.
Nicodemus goes to the master in the dark of night
And the master tells him he is not seeing it all and he needs to open his mind
and heart to a new reality.

What if we did the same?
What if right here, we took the role of Nicodemus
and went before the master, the rabbi, teacher, savior, friend
and inquired about he wants us to know
about the spirit, about our faith as it has come down to us
generation to generation?

The Zen Master – based on John 3:1-17
Aspen Community UMC
February 17, 2008

Page 5 of 5

What kind of statement from the master
could disrupt your worn out ways of thinking?
What stands in the way of new experience for you?

And, if you pretend you are Nicodemus for a moment
and go in the dark of night to ask a question of the master -

What might you ask? (Take a few moments)

Then -

What might the master say to you? (Take a few moments)

What does the master know you need to know?

And since our time is limited here this morning
would you think of your best listening times -
the times you are most ready or able to hear or experience the master.

They may be times of personal prayer.

They may be in times of stilling all other voices -
perhaps while shoveling snow or planting flowers.

Your times of being open may be when you are working for a cause, or reading a devotion.

Be aware in the next few days of the times you are most ready to come before the master
with your questions – and listen to what the master wants to share with you.

Like Nicodemus listened to Jesus.

I hope that this little while of being with Nicodemus and Jesus that night
has given you some new ways to contemplate the kingdom,
the idea of being born again, and how the spirit attends to you in your life.

Perhaps it can awaken some possibilities for your conversations
with the master and your life today.